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PERSIAN PAINTINGS

by

B. W. ROBINSON

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PERSIAN PAINTINGS

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B. W. ROBINSON

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LARGE PICTURE BOOK No. 6
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PERSIAN PAINTINGS

THE appeal of Persian painting is immediate. Its first impact on the beholder leaves an impression of vivid colour and of delicate figures moving in a fantastic fairy-land; next, its sheer brilliance of finish and meticulous perfection of technique must inevitably strike him; and he may then go on to appreciate its suave mastery of line, its subtle and often audacious colour-harmonies, and the simple effectiveness of its well-ordered compositions.

But the Persian artist was completely un-selfconscious. His social status being that of a skilled craftsman, he made no attempt to edify or instruct. His objects were simply to please the eye and flatter the taste of his patron, and to produce the most effective illustration he could of the subject in hand. His art was, in fact, a highly specialized art of illustration, and it is as illustrations that Persian paintings should first and foremost be regarded. Hence one of the clues to the Persian artist's appeal is that his work is immediately intelligible; as illustration it must be so, or he has failed of his purpose. The works of the Persian artist, indeed, have much in common with the stories he is called upon to illustrate—a type of story familiar to us from the *Arabian Nights*—where the simple, direct and even naive plot is enacted in a setting of ingenious elaboration or fabulous magnificence.

This is not to say that all Europeans are immediately able to 'take' Persian painting, though the simpler the approach the quicker the appreciation. But the obstacles are twofold. Firstly, Persian painting, like all other branches of oriental art, is governed by a set of conventions which we, upon whom the tradition of the Italian Renaissance still lies heavily, may at first find puzzling or even irritating. There is no 'drawing from nature' as we understand it; Persian artists always 'draw out of their heads'. Shadows, modelling and chiaroscuro are not attempted because the artist's head tells him that a shadow is a fleeting thing with no real existence, so why put it in? Anatomy and perspective as taught in our art-schools are largely disregarded, the one because (like everything else in a Persian painting) the figures are idealized symbols rather than attempts to portray people as actually seen; and the other because, in the Persian artist's view, it is an optical illusion. After all, everybody knows that a carpet is rectangular, however odd a trapezoid shape it may assume when looked at sidelong, and in any case, if it were 'correctly' rendered 'in perspective' the artist would lose the joy of painting, and the beholder that of appreciating, its rich and intricate design, and that would surely be a pity.

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This is just one of the many ways in which the Persian artist is always trying to please us who look at his works; and in face of this consistent attitude of his it were churlish in us not to go at least half-way to meet him by trying to see things from his point of view. Thus flowers and plants are magnified, sometimes enormously, in proportion to the human figure; but this too is for our benefit, to enable us to appreciate the delicate beauty of each leaf and blossom, and, incidentally, the artist's skill and loving care in portraying them. Again, he may be called upon to illustrate a night-scene. Everybody knows that it is dark at night, and one can see hardly anything; but he has a story to illustrate, and of what use is an illustration where the incident cannot be clearly seen? So our Persian artist tells us plainly that it is night-time by putting the moon and the stars in the sky, or, if the scene is indoors, by showing the lamps and candles lit, but otherwise he paints everything as clear as day. These are only a few of the many little devices used by Persian artists to make their work more immediately intelligible and attractive to the beholder; and after seeing a number of examples most Europeans should find no difficulty in entering into the spirit of these delicate, aristocratic and (to us) slightly artificial works, and not be unduly worried or put off when an ornamental tank of water is depicted in ground-plan or when figures on the skyline are painted the same size as those in the foreground.

The other obstacle is inevitable, but likely to prove less serious, namely the unfamiliarity to the majority of Europeans of the stories illustrated. The majority of these are taken from the *Shàhnàma* ('Book of Kings'), the national epic of some sixty thousand couplets written by the 11th-century poet Firdawsì, or from the works of some of the poets who came after him, such as Nizàmì or Jàmì. There is, alas, no handy compendium of Persian legends in English, though J. V. S. Wilkinson's *Shàh Nàmah of Firdausì* (Oxford, 1931) and Laurence Binyon's *Poems of Nizàmì* (London, 1928) retail the favourite stories from those two favourite poets with splendid illustrations from Persian originals, and to them the interested reader may be unhesitatingly referred.

. . . . . .

Historically Persian painting falls naturally into four periods. First comes that of the 'Abbasid Caliphs of Baghdàd, who exercised a nominal sway over most of the Near East from the 8th to the mid-13th century, when the Caliphate fell before the Mongol onslaught. Examples of painting from this period are rare, so thoroughly did the invading hordes carry out their work of universal destruction, and none is reproduced here. But the surviving works show acute powers of observation, a gift of naive realism, and many evidences of Byzantine influence.

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It took the savage conquerors two generations to acquire a veneer of civilization from the peoples they had subjugated, and so far as painting is concerned the Mongol period, which coincides roughly with the 14th century, is marked by a great influx of Chinese ideas which, superimposed and incorporated at first without much understanding, were gradually digested as the century went on, and produced some works of monumental quality. The style of the period is characterized by dull colours, large figures of pronounced Mongol features, a certain ungainliness of gesture and drapery, and, in general, a broad and somewhat formal effect.

Towards the end of the 14th century came the next great wave of invasion from Central Asia, that of Tìmùr, or Tamerlane, under whose descendants the Timurids, established throughout Persia by the beginning of the 15th century, a truly national style was developed. This is beyond doubt the golden age of Persian painting, ushered in by Junayd, whose magnificent illustrations to a manuscript of 1396 in the British Museum show this national style already formed, and culminating in the superb works of Bihzàd and his school at Heràt between about 1480 and 1507 when the last Timurid fell. Early Timurid paintings (Figs. 2–13) retain some of the Mongol formality while reducing the scale of the figures, thus achieving an effect of exquisite delicacy enhanced by the brilliant colours now in use. Bihzàd's special contribution was an increased naturalism breaking down the remains of the old stiffness and formality. His style continued to be imitated at Bukhàrà until the late 16th century (Fig. 18).

As the 16th century opened, the fourth period of Persian painting had already begun with the appearance of Shàh Isma'ìl Safawì under whom Persia was at last united under a Persian dynasty for the first time for eight and a half centuries. His son Tahmàsp was an enlightened patron of painting, which he occasionally practised himself, and among the galaxy of artists who frequented his court the name of Sultàn Muhammad is pre-eminent. This court style was a development of Bihzàd's supple naturalism on an enlarged scale (Fig. 21). But after its first half-century the Safawid period is characterized by a great increase in the amount of mediocre hack-work produced, and after 1600 the style degenerated into the languid mannerisms and effeminate elegance associated with the name of Rizà-yi 'Abbàsì, the last Persian painter with any pretensions to genius or originality (Figs. 27–31). The decline was hastened by increasing European influence throughout the 17th century.

After a period of stagnation and further decay in the 18th century, from which few paintings survive, there was a considerable revival of the art under Fath 'Alì Shàh (1798–1834) whose magnificent black beard and elegant waist

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provided never-failing inspiration to numerous court artists (Fig. 32). But this bastard westernizing style, often expressed in large oil-paintings on calico, cannot be compared with the splendid productions of the Timurid and early Safawid periods; and during the later 19th century Persian painting declined even further into unashamed and unskilled 'faking' of earlier works. A revival of the old traditions, however, is now in progress, and some of its results are distinctly pleasing, though more strongly inspired by the already decadent 17th century than by the purer styles of the earlier periods. Time alone will show whether this movement, at present at an almost purely imitative stage, is capable of throwing up an artist who could take a place worthily beside Junayd, Bihzàd, Sultàn Muhammad, and Rizà-yi 'Abbàsì.

. . . . . .

It must always be borne in mind that a reproduction in monochrome of a Persian painting, however clear, provides only a pale shadow of the original. The number reproduced in various books and periodicals is now very large, but the present selection consists entirely of examples hitherto unpublished and, in several instances, virtually unknown. For those wishing to familiarize themselves with the better-known masterpieces of the Persian artists, or to pursue the subject further, a short bibliography (in chronological order) is appended, confined to general works containing a rich and varied range of reproductions. All these books may be consulted in the Museum Library.

F. R. Martin. *The Miniature Painting and Painters of Persia, India and Turkey.* 2 Vols. London, 1912.

G. Marteau and H. Vever. *Miniatures persanes exposées au Musée des Arts Décoratifs.* 2 Vols. Paris, 1913.

P. W. Schulz. *Die persisch-islamische Miniaturmalerei.* 2 Vols. Leipzig, 1914.

E. Kühnel. *Miniaturmalerei im islamischen Orient.* Berlin, 1922.

E. Blochet. *Les Enluminures des Manuscrits orientaux de la Bibliothèque Nationale.* Paris, 1926.

E. Blochet. *Musulman Painting.* London, 1929.

A. Sakisian. *La Miniature persane du XIIe au XVIIe siècle.* Paris et Bruxelles, 1929.

L. Binyon, J. V. S. Wilkinson and B. Gray. *Persian Miniature Painting.* London, 1933.

A. Upham Pope (Editor). *Survey of Persian Art.* Vol. V, 812ff. Oxford, 1938.

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NOTES ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Cover Design from the Dunimarle *Shàhnàma* (cf 6–9 below).

1. Windsor Castle MS A/6, fol. 510b. *Shàhnàma* of Firdawsì dated 1058/1648: copyist, Muhammad Hakìm al-Husaynì. 148 miniatures. Made for the Library of Khàn 'Àlì Shàn Qarajaghài Khàn, supervisor of the Mashhad shrine. Presented to Queen Victoria by the wife of Kàmràn Shàh, Prince of Heràt, in 1839.

2. *Khamsa* of Nizàmì, fol. 46a. Dated 823/1420. Copyist, Ja'far al-Hàfiz. Perhaps executed at Yazd, where this copyist completed an anthology in 1417.

3. Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 22/1948, fol. 16b. A fragmentary MS known as the 'Manuk *Shàhnàma*' from its former owner. Some detached miniatures from it are in the British Museum.

4 & 5. R.A.S. MS 246, foll. 293a and 236b. *Khamsa* of Nizàmì with 21 miniatures, 8 of which are in the Shìràz style.

6–9. The 'Dunimarle *Shàhnàma*', foll. 86b, 95b, 130b and 145b. Dated 850/1446. Copied by Fath-allàh b. Ahmad al-Sabzawàrì for the Library of Sultàn Muhammad b. Murtazà, a local ruler in Màzandaràn. Planned for 152 miniatures, of which some 80 have been completed.

10 & 11. *Shàhnàma*, foll. 246b and 406a. Dated 861/1457. Copyist, Mahmùd b. Muhammad b. Mahmùd Jamàlì. Of the 54 miniatures three, including the double-page frontispiece, are in the Turkman style, and the remainder in a late form of the Timurid style of Shìràz.

12. John Rylands Library Persian MS 36 (not foliated). *Khamsa* of Nizàmì dated 848–849/1444–1445. 19 miniatures.

13. India Office Library Persian MS 138, fol. 14a. *Khamsa* of Jamàlì. Dated 870/1465 'at Baghdàd', but the 5 miniatures, which have unfortunately been covered with gauze netting, are good examples of the Heràt style of the period.

14–17. India Office Library Persian MS 387, foll. 55a, 124a, 65b and 318a. Some of the 48 miniatures in this *Khamsa* of Nizàmì are definitely Safawid in style, but the great majority, including those reproduced, are late examples of the Turkman style.

18. R.A.S. MS 251, fol. 92a. *Bùstàn* of Sa'dì with two miniatures. Copyist, Sultàn Muhammad Nùr.

19. *Khamsa* of Nizàmì, fol. 177b. 14 miniatures.

20. India Office Library Persian MS 133, fol. 389a. *Shàhnàma* copied 'at Shìràz' in 967/1560 by Hasan b. Muhammad Ahsan, with 24 miniatures.

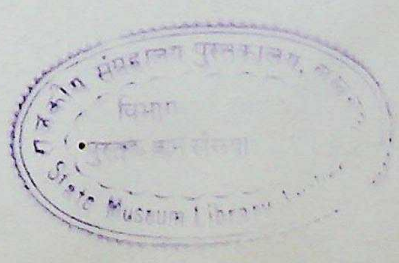
21. Fitzwilliam Museum MS 373, fol. 260a. *Khamsa* of Nizàmì dated 949/1542. Copyist, Muhammad Muhsin Tabrìzì. 17 miniatures.

22. Cambridge University Library MS Nn.3.74, fol. 57a. Persian version of the *'Ajà'ib al-Makhlùqàt* of Qazwìnì, dated 974/1566.

23 & 24. India Office Library Johnson Collection 28–11 and 27–15.

25. *Yùsuf u Zulaykhà* of Jàmì, fol. 154a. 8 miniatures.

26. India Office Library Persian MS 3540, fol. 18a. *Shàhnàma* with 59 miniatures, formerly the property of Warren Hastings.



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27 & 28. India Office Library Persian MS 1256, foll. 102b and 220b. *Shàhnàma* with 28 miniatures, the colophon obliterated.

29 & 31. From the 'Clive Album'.

30. Fitzwilliam Museum, Marlay Bequest Album of Persian and Indian miniatures and drawings.

32. India Office Library Persian MS 3442, fol. 354a. *Shàhinshàh Nàma* of Fath 'Alì Khàn copied by the royal scribe Mahdì al-Husaynì al-Farahànì in 1225/1810, with 38 miniatures by various court artists of Fath 'Alì Shàh.

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I. ARDASHÌR RIDING WITH GULNÀR THE SLAVE-GIRL. Isfahàn style; 1648
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2. KHUSRAW AND SHÌRÌN CONVERSING. Southern provincial style; 1420
Reproduced by permission of J. C. French, Esq.

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3. KHUSRAW AND GURDIYA, SISTER OF BAHRÀM CHÙBÌNA. Shìràz style; about 1430
Reproduced by permission of the Syndics from the original in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

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4. THE PROPHETS ELIAS AND KHIZR AT THE WELL OF ETERNAL LIFE. Heràt style; about 1440

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5. THE ENVOY OF DARIUS BEFORE ALEXANDER. Herat style; about 1440
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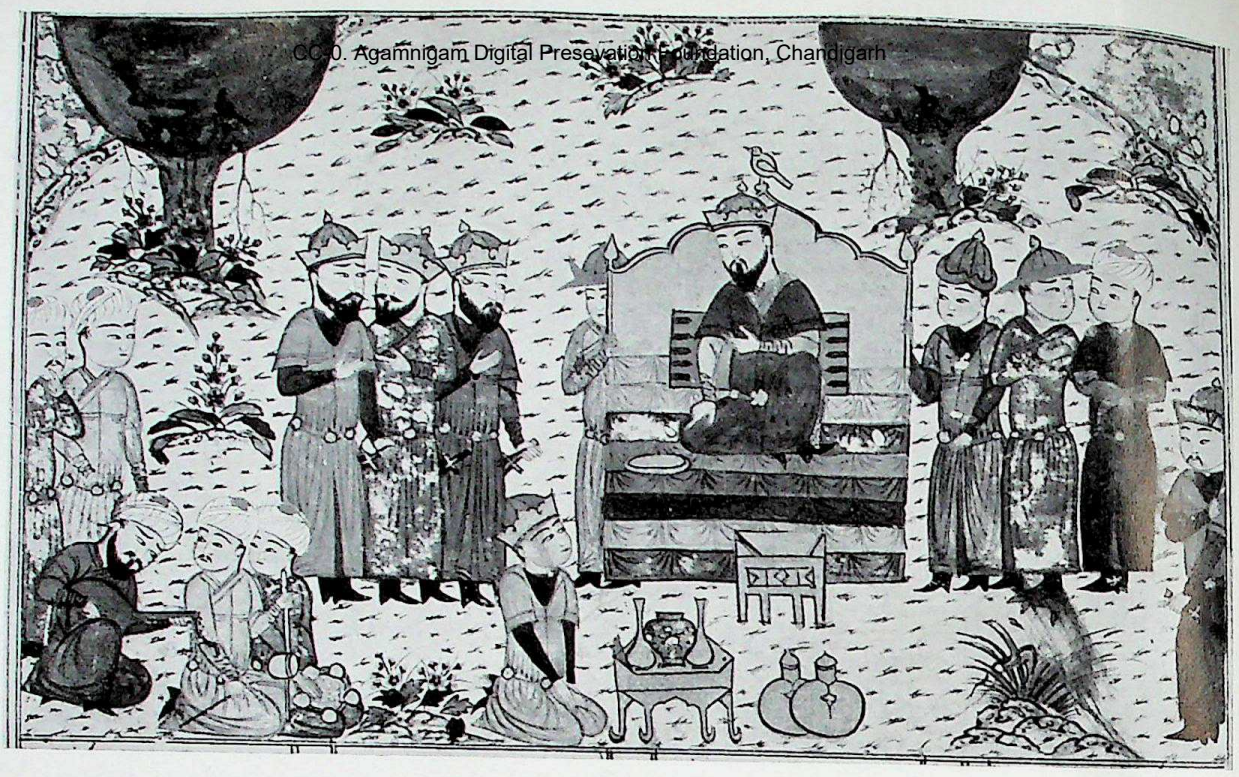
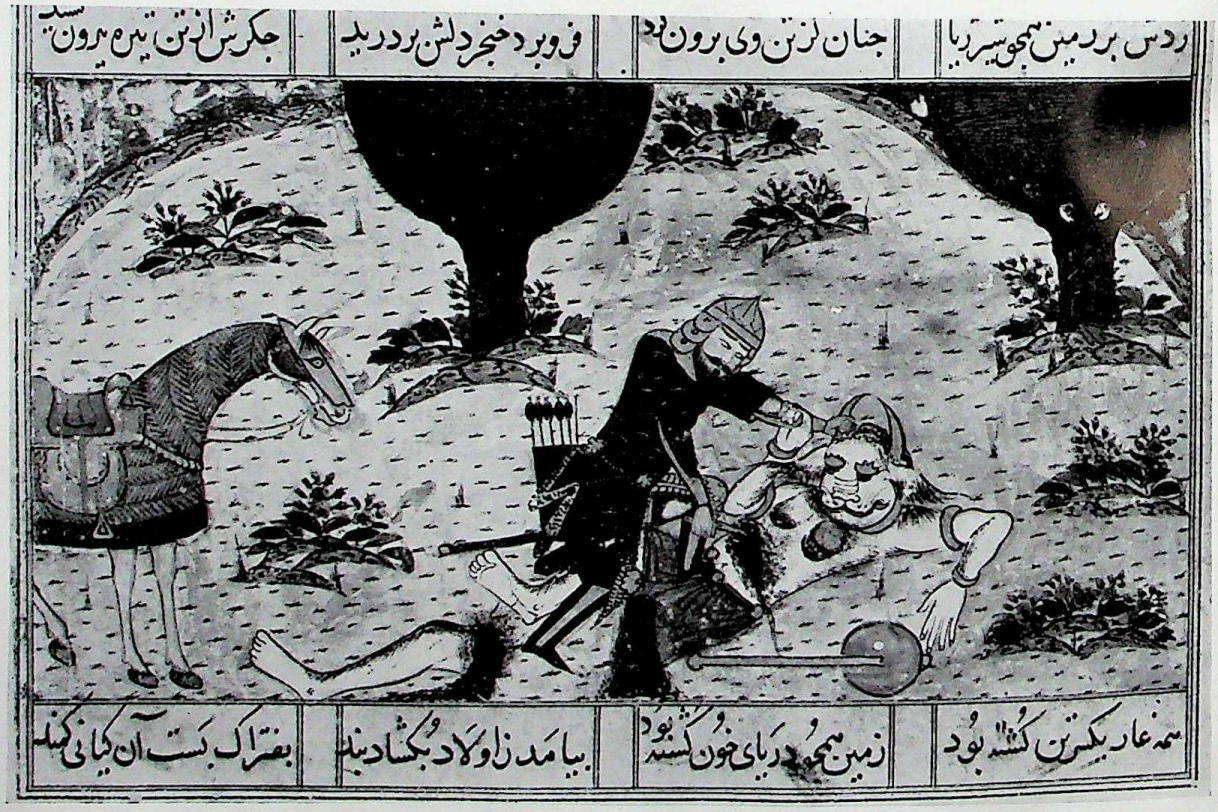


6. THE ENTHRONEMENT OF KAI KÀÙS



7. RUSTAM KILLING THE WHITE DEMON. Northern provincial style; 1446
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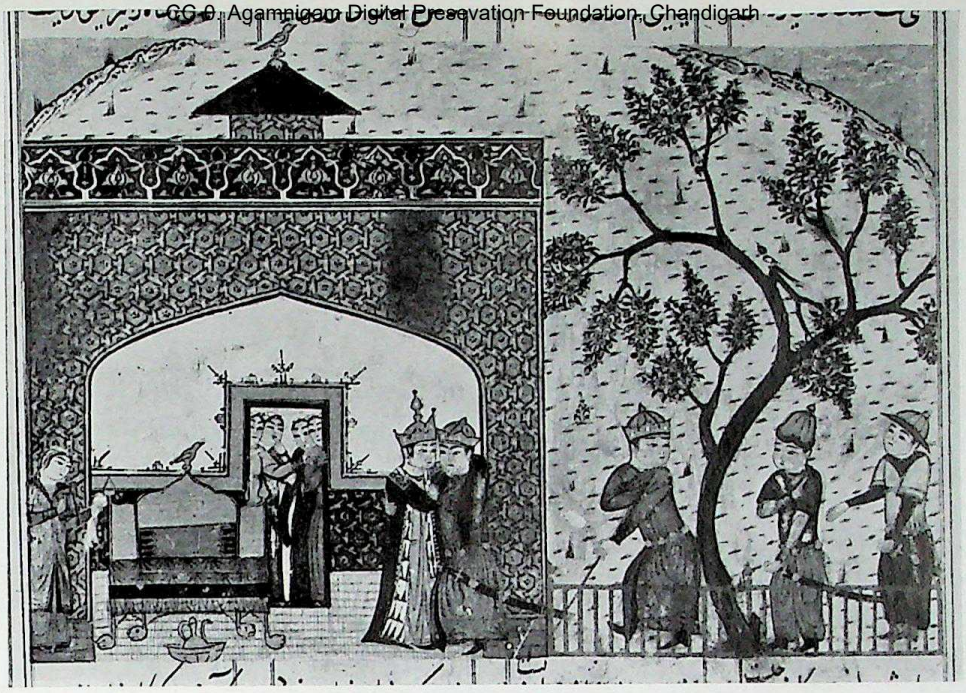
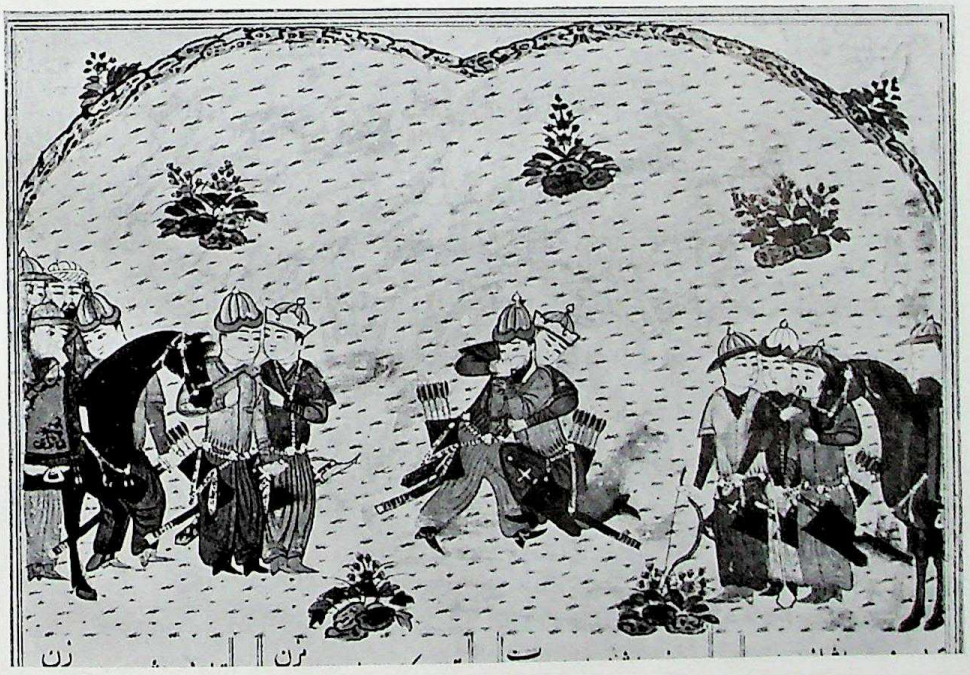


8. SIYÀWUSH TEMPTED BY QUEEN SUDÀBA



9. SIYÀWUSH DISPLAYING HIS SKILL AT WRESTLING. Northern provincial style; 1446
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10. KAI KHUSRAW RECEIVING THE WOMENFOLK OF AFRÀSIYÀB. Shìràz style; 1457
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11. BAHRÀM GÙR HUNTING LIONS. Turkman style (Shìràz); 1457
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12. KHUSRAW FEASTING. Shìràz style; 1445
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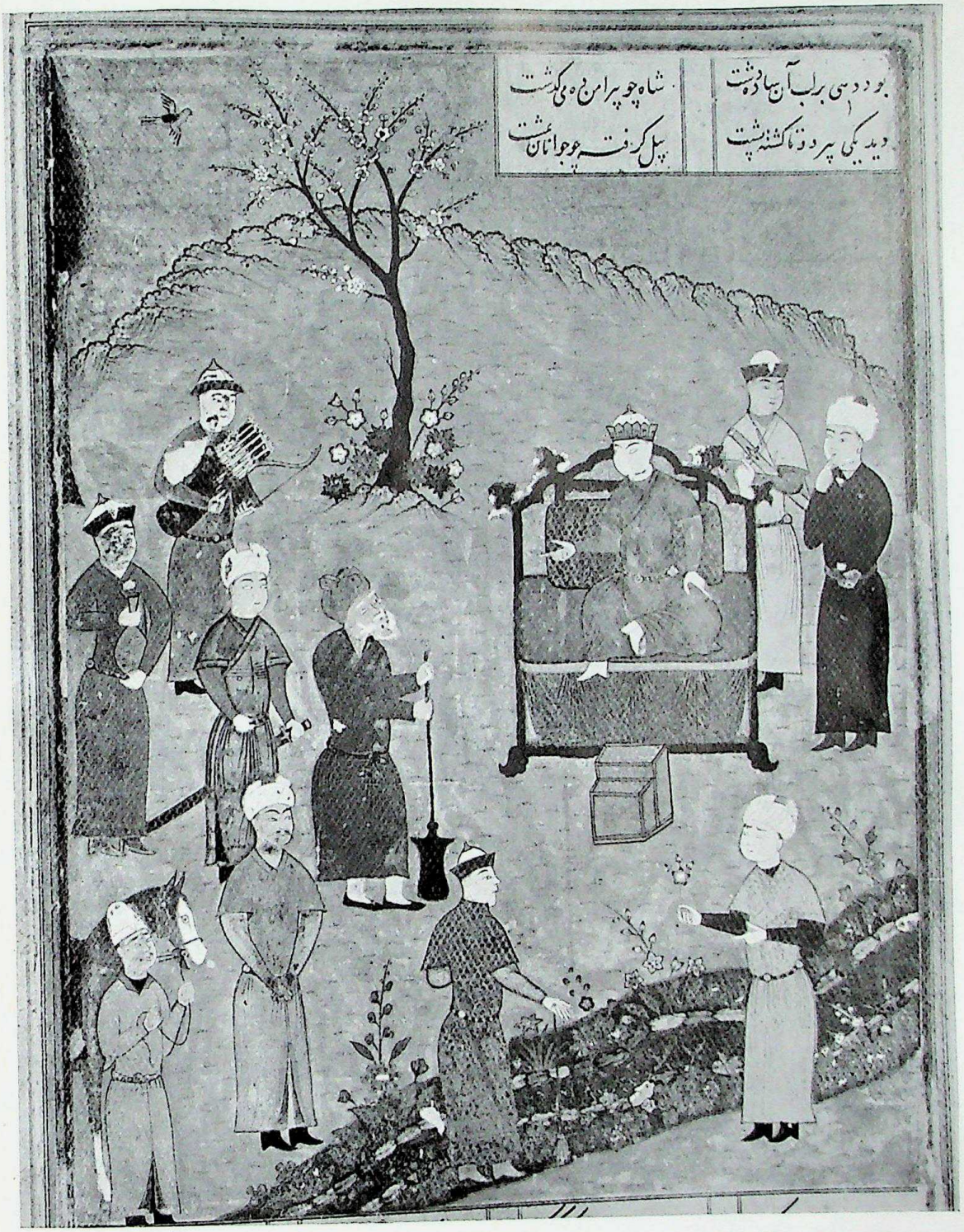

13. SULTÀN MAHMÙD AND THE GARDENER. Heràt style (Baghdàd); 1465
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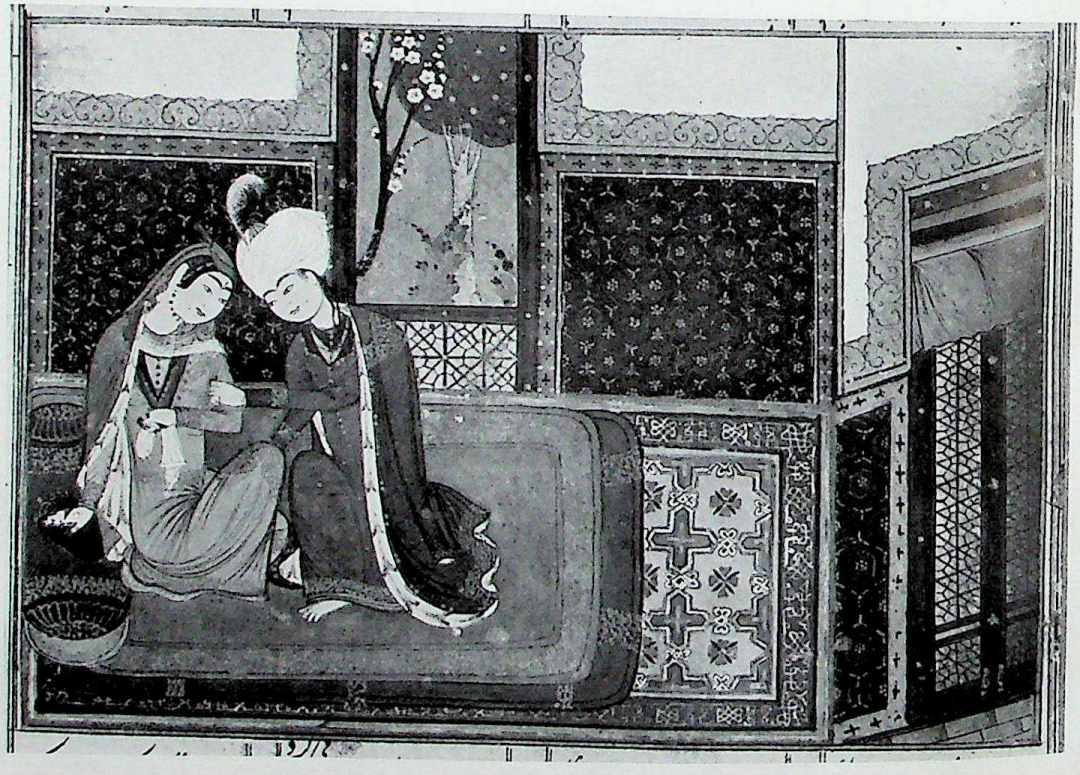
14. KHUSRAW SPIES SHÌRÌN BATHING



15. THE MARRIAGE OF KHUSRAW AND SHÌRÌN. Turkman style (Shìràz); beginning of the 16th century

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16. KHUSRAW IN NIGHT-ATTIRE KILLING A LION WITH HIS FIST. Turkman style (Shìràz); beginning of the 16th century

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17. ALEXANDER WATCHING A HAWK HOVER OVER TWO QUARRELLING BIRDS.
Turkman style (Shìràz); beginning of the 16th century
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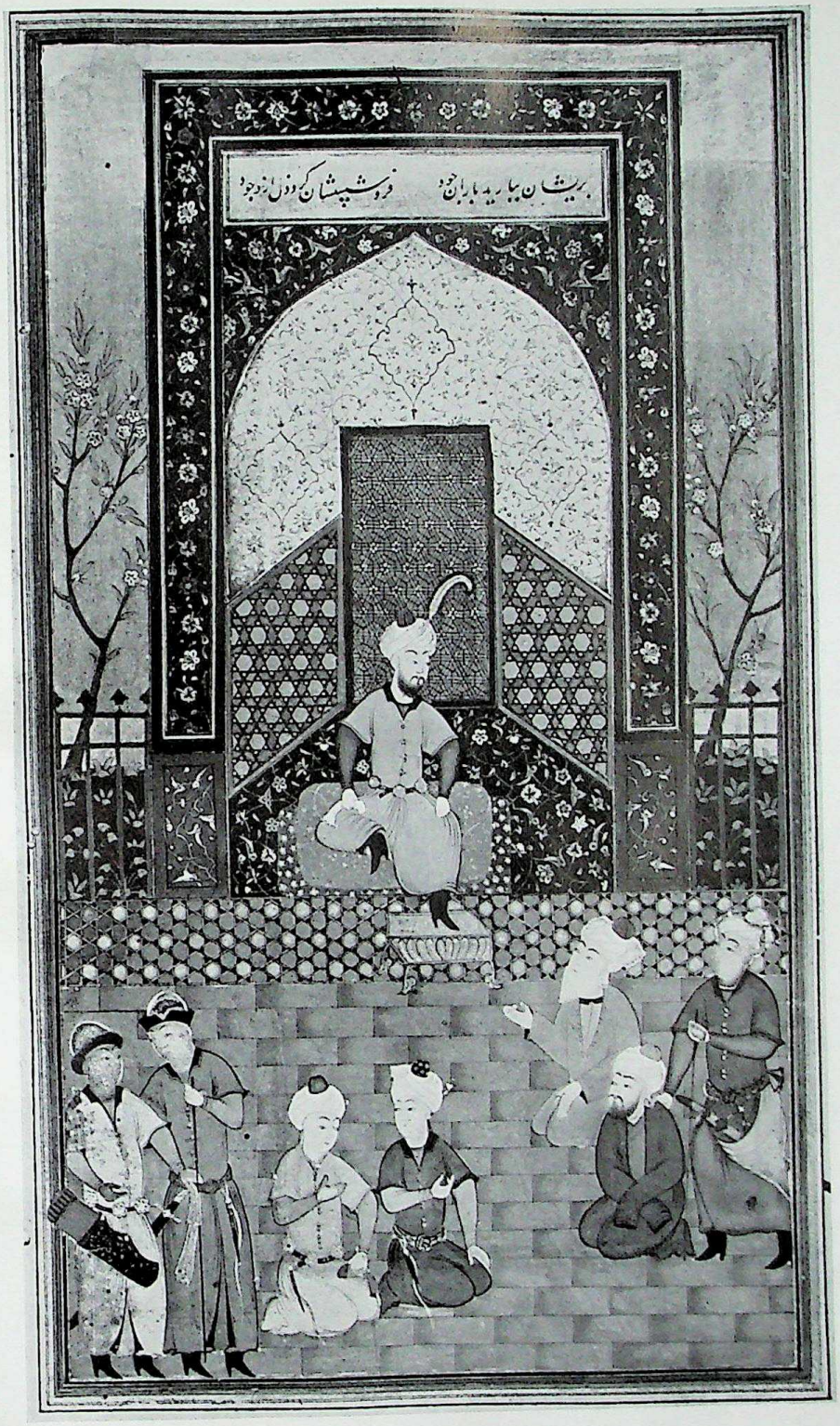

18. A PRINCE AND HIS COURT. Bukhàrà style; about 1525
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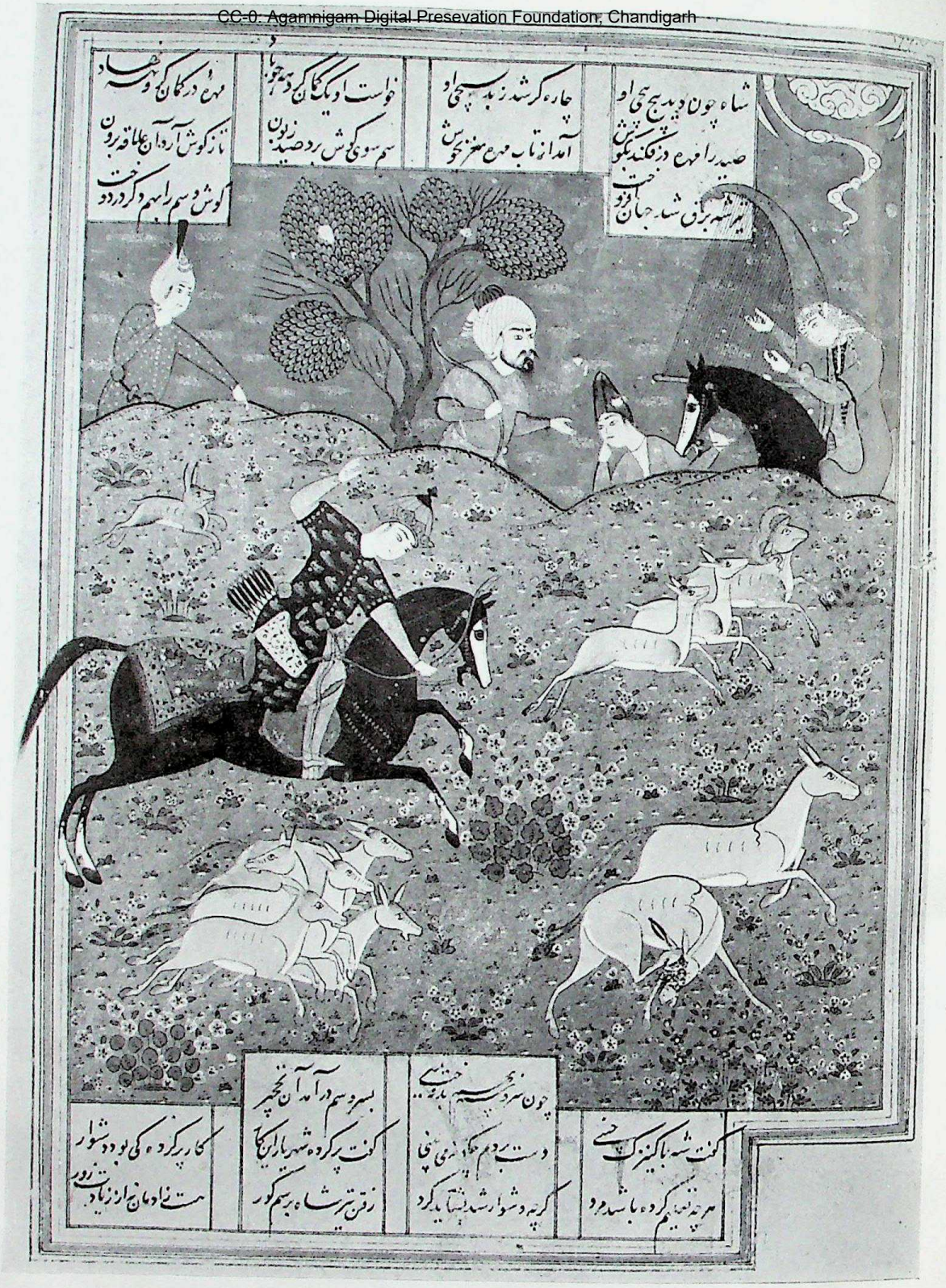

19. BAHRÀM GÙR HUNTING. Shìràz style; about 1530
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20. BAHRÀM GÙR HUNTING. Shìràz style; 1560

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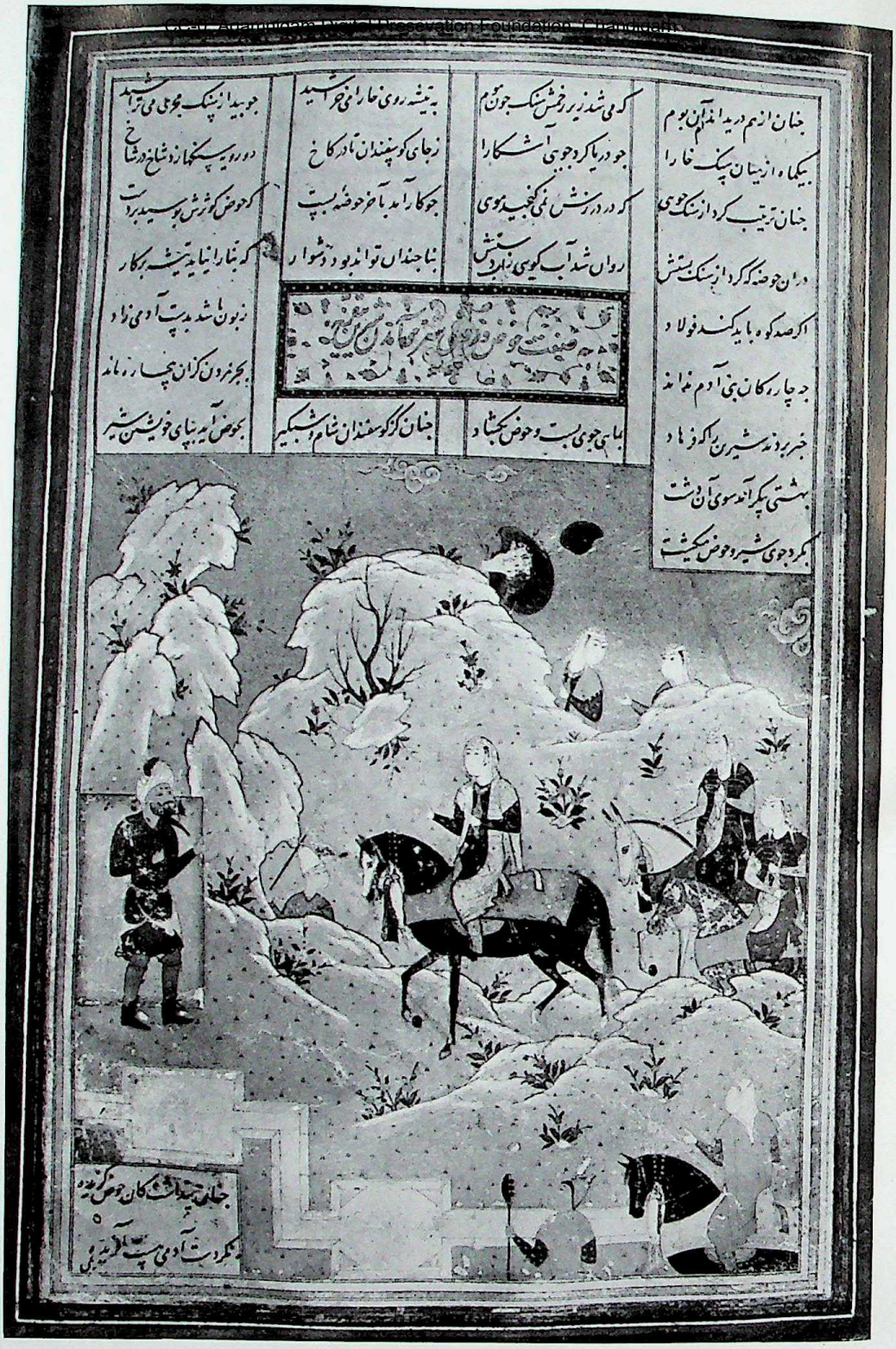

21. SHÌRÌN VISITING THE ARCHITECT FARHÀD AT MOUNT BEHISTÙN. Tabrìz style; 1542
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22. THE QUEEN OF WÀQWÀQ. Tabrìz or Qazwìn; 1566
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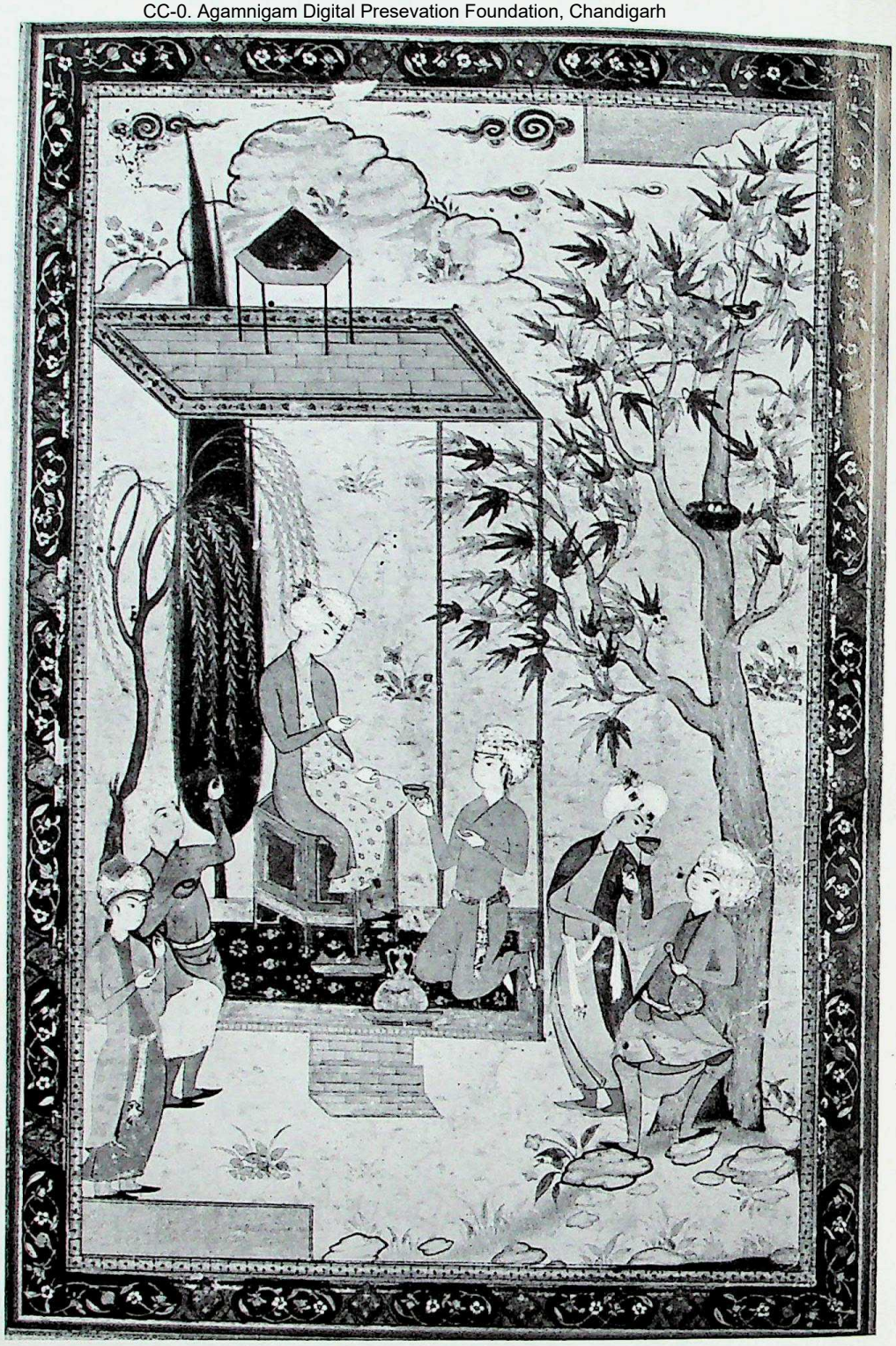

23. YOUNG PRINCE AT A DRINKING PARTY. Qazwìn style; about 1575
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24. A YOUNG PERSIAN AND A BEARDED INDIAN. Attributed to Muhammadī; about 1575

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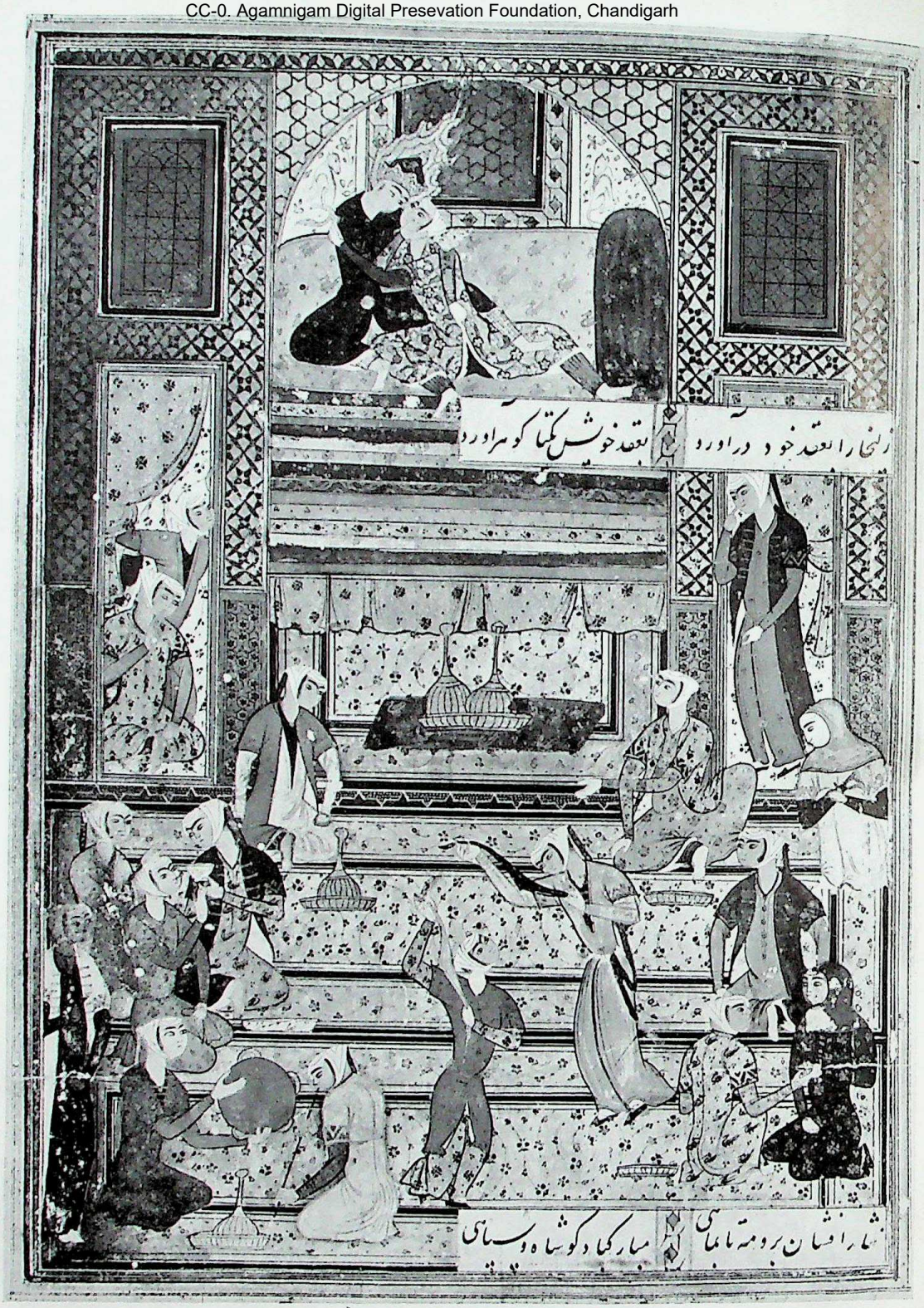

25. THE MARRIAGE-FEAST OF YÙSUF AND ZULAYKHÀ. Shìràz style; about 1580
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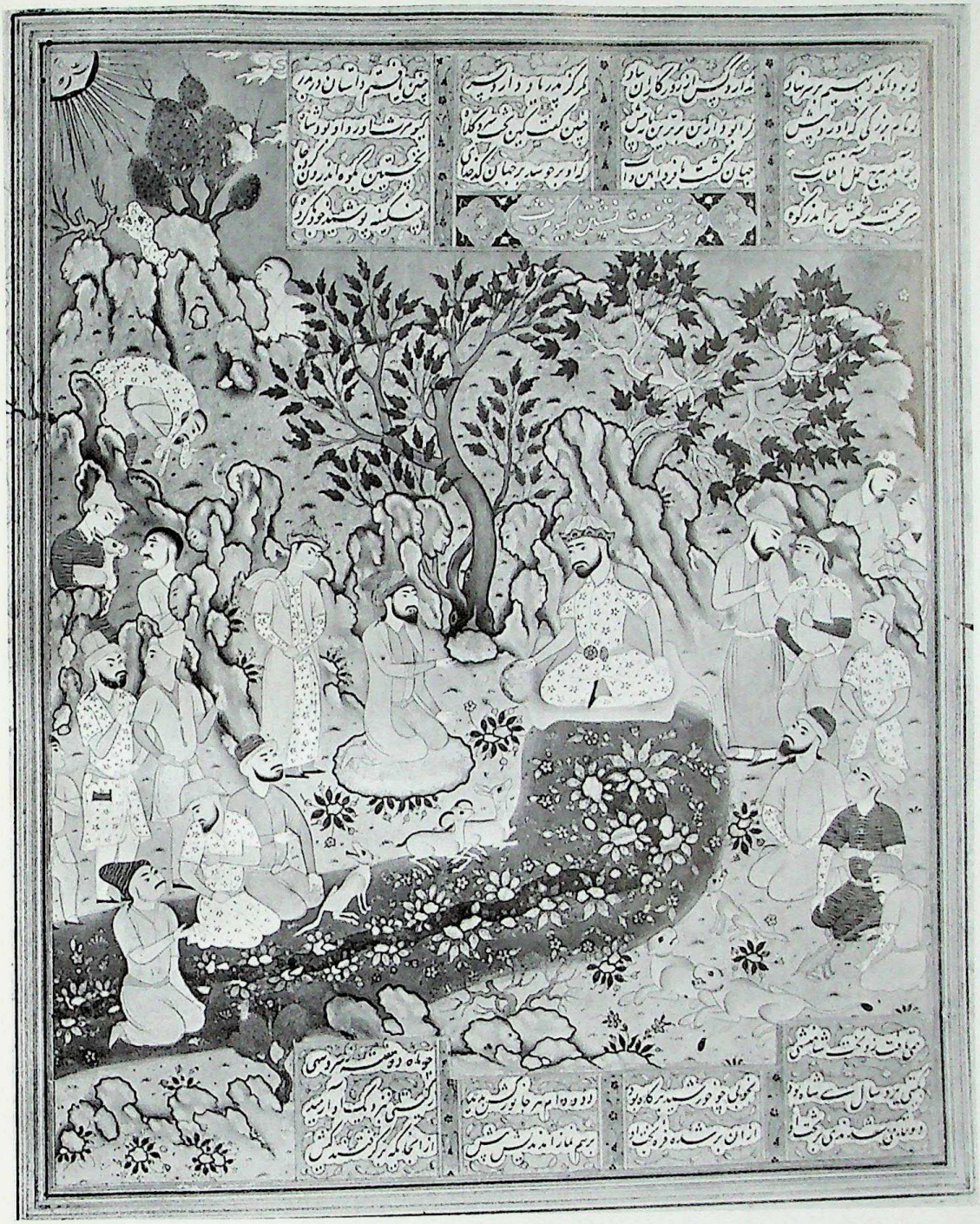

26. GAYÙMARTH, THE FIRST KING, AND HIS COURT. Shìràz style; about 1600
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27. RUSTAM AND HIS SON SUHRÀB, WHOM HE KILLED IN IGNORANCE. Isfahàn style; about 1630

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28. RUSTAM RESCUING BÌZHAN FROM IMPRISONMENT IN THE PIT. Isfahàn style; about 1630

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29. GIRL DOING HER HAIR. Isfahàn style; about 1600
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30. SEATED YOUTH. Signature of Rizà-yi 'Abbàsì; dated 1019/1610
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31. A PAIR OF LOVERS. Signature of Afzal al-Husayni; dated 1056/1646
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32. FATH ʿALÌ SHÀH IN BATTLE AGAINST THE RUSSIANS. Qàjàr style (Tehràn); 1810
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